

The Oklahoma Board on Geographic Names

The standardization of geographic names in the United States has been documented since 1890 when President Benjamin Harrison established the United States Board on Geographic Names (USBGN). The Board's authority was extended by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1906 and established in its present form by an act of Congress in 1947. In their responsibility to establish names for federal use the USBGN relies on recommendations from geographic names authorities in each state.

In 1926 encouraged by a request from the USBGN Governor Martin Trapp commissioned the first Oklahoma Geographic Names Board (OGNB). Each member of the new board was in the service of the State so no extra expenses were expected to be incurred in the operation therefore no appropriations were made available.

The primary function of the OGNB was to cooperate with the USBGN in determining the proper spelling and pronunciation of geographic names for the State. In addition the Board was to make adjustments when disputes when two or more names for the same feature were in common use. "The Board did not propose to initiate any reforms in regards to such matters." (Circular Letter No. 1, Chronicles of Oklahoma, Volume V, 1927)

Unfortunately the OGNB ceased to exist shortly after its creation leaving the State without an official geographic names authority until the Oklahoma Board on Geographic Names (OKBGN) was created in HB 810, section 310 (b), (4), 1965. The duty to act on the State's behalf was assigned to the Oklahoma Geological Survey. The function of the newly formed body was to make recommendation to the USBGN.

The Board intended to proceed with caution in an effort to make intelligent decisions that would be accepted by the residents of the area. A major concern was to prevent errors in names on printed maps by the U.S. Geological Survey and in publications of the Oklahoma Geological Survey.

Since the creation of the USBGN there have been close to three hundred decisions on the names of features and places within the State of Oklahoma. Actually the form "State of Oklahoma" is one of those decisions that changed an earlier decision of the USBGN, 1954.

These decisions are not taken lightly. The USBGN is very concerned about local opinions and that is where the OKBGN comes in. Before making recommendation the OKBGN seeks opinions from County Commissioners, City Councils, State agencies and interested individuals and groups in the area where the feature in questions is located. In addition the USBGN staff seeks out the opinions of any Native American tribal group that may have had a historical interest to the feature. The entire process from initial submission of a request to the final decision by the USBGN and signature by the Secretary of the Interior is very time consuming often taking One to three years, sometimes more.

Wayne Furr, Executive Secretary
Oklahoma Board on Geographic Names